

Sermon – Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 18: 21-35

Once upon a time there was a small boy named Sam, who lived a relatively normal life, or so he thought. Everyday Sam would try to be the best that he could be. He hated to make mistakes or in any way attract the ire of his stern father.

One day when Sam was playing with his friend from across the street something happened. Nothing major but one of those dreaded moments that would bring down the wrath of his father. Paul and Sam were playing in the neighbor's yard as they had gone away. Sam had a somewhat destructive bent to his personality probably born of his inability to express himself in a healthy way.

Sam and Paul were playing smash'm'up with their Matchbox cars. These were small metal replica cars popular with young boys. They would try and simulate car accidents by throwing the cars against a brick wall. Time after time the cars would not yield to the force of impact. So the boys threw them harder and harder. The fatal throw eventually happened.

Sam threw the car with all of his might but it went higher than he anticipated. Smash went the car into the decorative trim tile on the edge of the patio. The tiles broke and Sam and Paul stood mortified. They quickly collected the cars and retreated to the safety of their houses.

The next day the neighbor returned and soon found the broken tiles. He asked Sam's father if the boys had been playing in the yard. Soon Sam found himself under the glare of his father's gaze being integrated about the damage. "Do you know anything about these broken tiles?" Sam's father asked him. "No" came the sheepishly quiet response. "I thought I heard you playing next door. yesterday" The familiar shrug of the shoulders started to confirm Sam's guilt.

The fear of his father eventually caused Sam to relent and he admitted his guilt. The shame of having to apologize to the neighbor was almost too much for Sam to bear. It felt like the sun was scorching him alone, his friend Paul nowhere to be seen. The pain and embarrassment of being caught lying and causing damage was seared into his memory.

Throughout Sam's life he often found himself in situations that demanded an admission of guilt over some action he took. Each time a situation arose, the painful memory of that day back when came flooding back. The shame. The embarrassment. It never seemed to go away. Sam had to be accountable for his actions yet often some of those actions couldn't be admitted. A pattern of behavior had been embedded into Sam's life.

Each of us will ultimately be accountable to God for our life's actions, the Apostle Paul writes in his letter to his friends in Rome. Being accountable means admitting to actions where we were not in the right, or actions that caused hurt or pain to another, or actions that resulted in obtaining something by deception.

Owning up to our actions, all of them, good and not so good, is hard for many people. There seems at times to be an invisible forcefield around lies and grievous actions that cause us to deny the impact or our complicity. How many times do we hear 'not-guilty' pleas from defendants, only to find out that they were indeed quite guilty of the crime.

Sam's story is a simple one but one played out in families all over the world. Denying a truth is often easier than admitting to the action, because the power of shame and embarrassment can be overwhelming. When we give false testimony, or we bend or distort the truth to our advantage, we end up heaping judgement upon the person who is often the victim, who tries to tell the truth only to have it denied by us.

Sam's initial denial of his actions sought to deny the truth that his father and neighbor knew, that is that he probably did cause the damage. Getting him to admit it was the issue. Many times we might find ourselves standing in similar shoes to Sam's father. We know that something is not right or we know that something that did happen is being denied or covered up, but getting at the truth becomes a major ordeal, igniting arguments and potentially ending relationships.

For many young people, and some older people, it is hard to externalize all the emotions, feelings and thoughts that arise in such situations. It is easier to internalize them and not deal with the potential conflict that might arise, or the rejection and shame that sometimes comes with admission of guilt.

Feelings that are generated by such intense situations, and that are internalized, fester away at a person's soul, resulting in a constant cycle of repetitive actions that drag a person down, sometimes in the extreme into depression and suicide. The only antidote to the wounds of this aspect of life is mercy and forgiveness. If we do not fear admitting the truth of our actions, the pain or damage that they caused, then we are more able to heal both our own souls and our relationship with the other person or people.

On the flipside we might have been the person who felt wronged by another's actions, or felt the force of a perpetrator's denials that then cause others to believe we were lying. Sometimes offering forgiveness for a hurt caused to us can also be very difficult.

Over the past few years I've pastored two men who had struggled for years to forgive a parent for an action from their childhood. Both men had terminal illness. One a youngish 50-year-old, with terminal leukemia. The weight of the pain from his father's betrayal of his mother sat on him like an elephant. He was deeply troubled. So we talked late one night in his hospital room about his feelings and what forgiveness might look like for him.

As I was about to leave him he reached for the phone and called his father and offered him forgiveness for all the hurt he'd experienced due to his dad's infidelities. The young man died a few weeks later, at peace his sister told me, that he'd finally been able to overcome the pain of a festering hurt.

The second man was older, in his mid 70s. He had stage 4 lung cancer that multiple chemo treatments was not improving. He was a Christian man but he wrestled with a hurt he had experienced, caused again by his father's infidelities. His father had long been dead but he knew he hadn't resolved the hurt he felt and as his life ebbed away it was foremost on his heart.

This man worked through his hurt and the suffering that he lived with as a result of his father's actions. He came to understand that the power to heal himself was within his heart, and through his action of mercy, even to a deceased loved one, he could be reconciled to his father once again. He did the work of acknowledging the pain, understanding his father's actions and offering the gift of forgiveness, both to his father, and also to himself.

Jesus tells Peter that if someone in the church sins against him, he should forgive the man, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. In other words, offering mercy and forgiveness is a posture we adopt as Christians that informs all of our actions during our lives. We don't just forgive once and then if the other person continues to hurt us, begin to hold a grudge. Jesus teaches us to continually offer forgiveness because to do so cleanses the soul and allows us to live free of the guilt, shame and pain. It also helps heal the offenders soul too.

The parable told by Jesus that we heard this morning reveals an example of one person receiving the forgiveness of another, but not being changed by the exchange. The master forgave his slave who begged for mercy yet the same slave did not offer similar mercy to those that owed him money. He acted punitively trying to punish his debtors.

If God took a similar posture we would all be condemned. Yet God does not, and a key aspect of Jesus teaching is that God always stands in a posture of welcome, open heart, ready to forgive us as we acknowledge our own failings and seek to be made right in our relationship. God offers freely grace and mercy, knowing we are vulnerable and fallen creations, in need of healing and reconciliation.

What God offers those of us who believe, we must offer to those that hurt us.

In our nation today, we can see the damage being done when lies and manipulation of truth, is not acknowledged and those that know the truth get denigrated for speaking out or calling attention to the lie. The moral fabric of the country has been significantly damaged, and many young people are being exposed to this unethical and morally corrosive culture. Their exposure will have an adverse effect on them, their families and their communities.

Young Sam eventually admitted his guilt and faced the consequences of his lie. It caused him shame, the memory of which stayed with him for a long time. But ultimately it was the correct thing to do, and living with the guilt of not owing up to the damage caused, would have had a more detrimental impact on his life.

We too must find the strength and the fortitude to first admit our own mistakes and actions, and seek the forgiveness of those we have wronged. We can then acknowledge the pain caused to us by the actions of others and work toward offering the hand of mercy and forgiveness. We can't be fully reconciled to God, or to each other, without each of us opening up our hearts to be vulnerable to the pain of admission of guilt and hurt.

Jesus knew this and has left us with a road map to full reconciliation with God and with each other. We would be wise to start the journey of reconciliation before it is too late. When people see us working our way along this path, it encourages them to start down the road as well. This is a gift to the world.

Amen